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POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

It is not this reviewer who says that, or invokes for this poet "grief's lustiness." May even grief soften a heart of brass? And is a deep resistless humor like Miss Moore's the most subtly corrosive destroyer of greatness?

H. M.

A MYSTIC WARRIOR

The Mystic Warrior, by James Oppenheim. A.A. Knopf.

We might count as art every cross-country flyer cutting its shriek into a black sky or a blue sky; every sky-scraper flinging windows, light, smoke into an incredulous sky; every unimpeachable bath-room trinity; the giant torsos of boilers and bellies of gas-tanks; the bird-like or fish-like aeroplane; the architecture of the farm—silo, granary and barn; or, for the matter of that, the fields of grain themselves, the vain prodigal orchards. It is in the air to do this. Out of such industrial shapes men are making violent tragic-comic drama, ruled as in art by the mathematics of the elements. So the analogy is close and tempting, and we can point that way to America as rich in self-expression. Or we may follow another trend of fashion—an import out of French dadaism or a mood synchronous with it—and abandon the word art altogether as an obsolete and paupered notion. A composer of genius was recently heard to bandy the idea of an anti-art society, where he said, lightly but seriously, any artist of consequence belonged. Ben Hecht in his first work of size follows his apparently biographic hero to say it is not

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“art” he wants, “art is something he can spit out in conversation.” In a foreword to an exhibition of his photographs Alfred Stieglitz formally junks the word along with a number of abstractions. Yet it was a word concrete enough to artists, not so long dead either—Cézanne, Degas, Rodin, Whistler—to whom the living still pay homage.

People may be wiped from the face of the earth, but art is.

And there are still those who echo this as a hard truth, in whose eyes even the machine has been unable to break the essential sequence of things. They have need of this word to name the one human reality running so close to all reality as to far outstrip that vanity, self-expression; as to make shapes more intentional, more delicate, more potent than any American industry has yet made. In the pages of *The Mystic Warrior*, an analysis of himself, James Oppenheim writes himself down as one of these. His sense of the relentless absolutes of art, his denial of himself as an absolute, instil this poem with a deep candor, a kind of darkened tranquillity—virtues rare enough today to mean in themselves distinction:

The artist, finally the artist?

.
America shuns him, cutting herself off from her own greatness:
But he comes nevertheless . . . he is Walt riding on top a bus, and Poe
dreaming of stars in a cottage with his wife dying,
And Emerson, absent-minded, minded of the Oversoul, in Concord
woods,
And Hawthorne moody in sad Puritanism,

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And Mark Twain smoking cigars in bed, sweating and groaning over
Huckleberry Finn,
And giant-like tearful Dreiser, and Sandburg sitting in a newspaper
office,
And Vachel Lindsay jazzing in Paradise (or is it Springfield, Illinois?)
And Masters among all souls in strange Spoon River.

.
So I speak for the artist . . .
But also I speak for the multitude like myself, with equal struggles and
the same yearnings,
The same sorrows, joys and lamenting,
But no gift: inarticulate, frustrated, America's victims.

There is the argument, in the unfolding of which perhaps Oppenheim does not quite go the length of candor. For his indecisions and his failures he can't resist blaming America more than the mere fact that the inevitable image, word, phrase come seldom to him. You enjoy the drift of the book, but you have to ignore more than one lapse of taste—that unerring instinct for the word and the place. Perhaps too breathless an awe has sometimes defeated him. There is a hint of this in the picture of a meeting with “our most powerful novelist”—Theodore Dreiser, one is led to suppose:

So we walk, we talk.
And here is the Hudson, the North River, with shouting gold of sunset
and smokes of the tugboats,
Shadows of cliffs, like the spacious threshold of a spiritual universe;
And I grow tense with the wonder of it and feel the artist's despair of
setting it down in words . . .
So I turn to him: “Just look,” I say, “could you describe that?”
He speaks carelessly:
“Oh, yes—that or anything.”

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Yet this reverence for great vision, great craft, has had its reward, the reward of concentration—workmanship. If this writer were a house-painter, you might not always like the colors he mixed, but his surfaces, his finish would be scrupulous. So *The Mystic Warrior* contains pictures,—indelible pictures, snatches of rhythm, voices: pictures of childhood in New York schools and brownstone houses; pictures of a death and a funeral:

I am a tailor: I am cutting and sewing a pair of pants for my little brother:

My little grandmother comes in, walks softly, inaudibly by me . . .
She carefully pulls down the shades, making the room yellow . . .
I confront her: "Why do you pull down the shades, grandma?"

She says there is too much sunlight . . .
Then she looks at me, hesitates, takes me by the arm,
Whispers in my ears, "James, your father is dead."

I smell flowers—lilies, roses, violets—I shall never forget that smell . . .
I am taken down in the long parlor . . .
There are people there: uncles and aunts, grandpa, grandma . . .
There are camp-stools, and a black-cloth coffin smothered in flowers . . .

And now my infancy is ended . . .
For this is death; I have come face to face with my enemy, death . . .
Servant-girls soothed me, saying, "He is an angel now." . . .

Vivid portraits of people; pictures of offices, wharves, homes; pictures of a Jewish bourgeoisie in New York, redolent of the race, recalling the riches Rembrandt made of the same theme in Amsterdam centuries ago; and the breath of countless streets:

Old days on the West Side,

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Old nights.

Summer nights when there was a faint Coney Island stir down electric-
lit Eighth Avenue . . .

A moth-stir, flame, shadow, Bagdad.

There is unction in *The Mystic Warrior*, but almost no sham, no bunk. At its best the tenor of it is curiously dark and steady—a suggestion of slow night rain, or a ship at anchor in night waters. The poem succeeds in being a distillation, in contrast to the brew made, it seems, after the recipe: “To hell with work, novelty will provide the kick.” Oppenheim, you feel, has earned the right to say:

In the grey air we walk, in the glisten of the dying year;
And my soul goes down to roots, and the roots, like a tree’s, are deep in
the earth.

Acknowledging this, you are even willing to ignore the abstract use of the word “soul.” *Dorothy Dudley*

MRS. WYLIE’S POEMS

Nets to Catch the Wind, by Elinor Wylie. Harcourt, Brace & Co.

A lyric voice slight, but clear and fine, may be heard in this book, the voice of a free and lightly ranging spirit. The sound of it is now gay, now grave, but always it holds a little aloof—one detects that something “austere, immaculate” for which the poet herself holds her Puritan ancestry responsible. In a number of poems her mood is thoughtfully admonitory, as *The Eagle and the Mole*, *Madman’s Song*, or *Say Not of Beauty she is Good*: